

SPEECH

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OF

*James  
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MR. J. X. M<sup>c</sup>LANAHAN,

1809 - 1861

OF PENNSYLVANIA,

ON THE

SLAVE QUESTION.

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DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, FEBRUARY 19, 1850.

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The House being in Committee of the Whole, and having under consideration the annual message of the President—

Mr. McLANAHAN obtained the floor, and said :

Nothing was further from my intention than to address either the House or the Committee of the Whole, at so early a day of its session. But I have been so much astonished and pained by the sentiments I have heard avowed upon this floor, that I would do injustice to my own feelings, as well as to the expectations of the sterling constituency I have the honor in part to represent, were I to remain entirely silent. Sir, not many days after the commencement of the session, an honorable member from Georgia, (Mr. Toombs,) under circumstances of the highest excitement in this hall, emphatically asserted that the dark and portentous subject of slavery lay at the bottom of all our difficulty in effecting an organization of the House ; that sectional feelings, sectional prejudices were at work, and sectional lines were about to be drawn, which arrayed the North against the South. Let us for a moment revert to what has occurred, and see with what semblance of justice a charge at once so serious and so important was made. A southern candidate for the Speakership was nominated by the Democratic party, and supported by the united votes of that party North and South. A northern candidate was nominated by the Federal party for the same office, and was supported by the united northern and southern votes of that party. I have nothing to say of the guerrilla troops that hung on the flanks of the great contending armies. But, sir, it is well known that the regular line of battle was drawn up according to well established party tactics. Party organization was paramount to all sectional feeling throughout the contest. Had sectional instead of party lines been drawn, how different the result ; for then it is and must be perfectly evident to every



one, that the conjoint vote from the North and West, irrespective of party ties, could have elected the officers, and organized the committees of this House within two hours after we were assembled together on the first day of the session. The Speaker occupies the chair in which you now sit by a party vote, and was thus invested with authority to appoint the committees. With what skill, judgment, and justice he discharged that important duty, remains to be seen—the prognostic laudations of the *Union* and the *Pennsylvanian* to the contrary notwithstanding. It is true that the nominee of the Democratic party for the office of Clerk—a gentleman, by the way, who brought to the advocacy of the southern view of the question of slavery an amount of energy, and argument, and eloquence, seldom equalled and never surpassed by the most gifted son of the South—it is true he was defeated by the desertion of southern Democrats, who saw fit to elect a southern Whig. No one *dare* allege that this division arose from sectional motives. It was a purely patriotic act. The vote cast a few days ago to lay upon the table the resolution of the honorable member from Ohio, (Mr. Root,) indicated anything else than the existence of sectional feelings on the question of the Wilmot proviso. Thus, it must be seen, that the accusation against the integrity and patriotism of those who represent the freemen of the North and the West was as unfounded as it was uncalled for and unjust.

Mr. Chairman, does not the history of the last Presidential campaign furnish grounds to imagine that scarcely two years ago some ten or twenty thousand of the chivalrous yeomanry of the sunny South might have been seen eagerly pressing around one of their favorite orators, as he proclaimed to them the glad tidings that a political saviour had been found to relieve the South from the thralldom of northern fanaticism?—that the Constitution was safe, and the Union would be preserved?—that he gave them joy that that candidate was General Taylor, a southern man with southern feelings and southern principles? Elect him and let Congress pass the Wilmot proviso in a territorial bill, he will interpose his constitutional veto, and preserve the rights of the South. Let Congress pass a bill abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia, his constitutional veto will protect you in your just rights. May we not suppose him as adopting the favorite and familiar language so often introduced in the resolutions of his political party at the South?—"The candidate whose claims I advocate is of us, is with us, is for us. Elect him, preserve yourselves, your constitution, and your country from destruction." And as his "words that burned and thoughts



that breathed" fell upon the ears of his too credulous auditors, one long, loud shout of joy burst from their hearts. The day came, their votes were cast, and General Taylor was elected President of the United States. The first Congress under this new Administration had scarcely convened; parties were balloting for a Speaker; the President's message had not been sent in, not an intimation of his policy had been given; the House unorganized, not in a condition to legislate on the subject of slavery, or on any other subject; and a southern orator is seen rushing into the hall of national representation—

———"His eye, in a fine phrensy rolling,  
Doth glance from Heaven to earth, from earth to Heaven,  
And, as imagination bodies forth the forms of things seen,  
*His fancy* turns them into shapes, and gives  
To airy nothing a local habitation and a name;  
Such tricks hath strong imagination."

Ah, sir, that same voice is heard *here*, invoking the spirit of discord to preside over your councils, until he has some assurance for southern rights on the subject of slavery, proclaiming *disunion!* and willing to dedicate himself, body and soul, to the accomplishment of this high and noble purpose. Do southern Federalists forget Truman Smith's Southern Life of General Taylor? Do southern orators forget their solemn pledges to a confiding constituency? Do they forget that the redeemer of the South from northern thralldom was elected, has taken an oath to support the Constitution, and even now sits at the other end of the avenue, installed President of the United States, daily receiving *aid and comfort* from that American *Tallyrand*, the far-seeing prime minister Clayton? Or have their fervent hopes "in this the winter of their discontent" for political salvation from that quarter, fallen at last into sullen despair?

Mr. Chairman, it is not my design to enter into an elaborate argument upon the various thrilling and important questions involved in the present momentous issue before the country; it is simply to state here what I believe to be the sentiments of a vast majority of the people of Pennsylvania. Sir, this war of the political elements may rage; the tempest of civil discord may howl around and within the Capitol; but there is no danger of the destruction of the republic. The memorable declaration that "the Union must and shall be preserved;" is as true now as when it was uttered by the illustrious Jackson.

The "old Keystone" of the federal arch is in the right place, and the foundations of that arch are laid firm and deep in the



affections of the people. The geographical position of Pennsylvania—the moral integrity and proverbial patriotism of her citizens, give her an influence between opposing southern and northern extremities that always has and always must be felt in promoting the general welfare. She is emphatically the conservative State of the Union. Receiving fewer benefits from, and conferring more on the Confederacy than any other State, her self-sacrificing motto has ever been, “Union for the sake of the Union.” If she regards the Wilmot proviso as one of the political humbugs of the day, she looks upon Southern nullification as another and a more detestable one. If she considers Northern fanaticism as a chimera, she regards Southern fury as another and a greater one. Extremes are always dangerous; and if ever the North and South meet, it must be alone there where is safety—in the moderation and patriotism of a middle course. It need not be concealed, and it cannot be denied that in Pennsylvania, we, with a unanimity unequalled on any other subject, regard slavery as a national curse and a national disgrace. Indeed, sir, this is the noble and triumphant sentiment of the age in which we live. We sympathize in it with all our souls; and in doing so we but keep time in the progressive march of the mind, pressing onward and upward to the attainment of the political and religious freedom of every son of Adam. But we remember the Constitution of our country, and we would not forfeit our faith to the Union by altering or erasing one jot or tittle of that sacred compact. We would leave the question of slavery where the Constitution left it—with the people of the States in which it exists. This was the solemn decision of the Congress of the United States as early as the year 1790, when the Society for the Abolition of Slavery in Pennsylvania petitioned for action on the subject. It was then resolved “that Congress have no authority to interfere in the emancipation of slaves, or with the treatment of them in any of the States—it remaining with the several States alone to provide any regulations therein which humanity and true policy may require.”

As to the absolute and unqualified right of Congress to legislate on the subject of slavery in the Territories, we have not the slightest doubt. The right is given in the clear terms of the Constitution itself—so amply and so often interpreted and confirmed by a series of legislative precedents, that it is a matter of astonishment that any jurist could ever hesitate on the subject, or that even a Virginia abstractionist could have raised a quibble. But it does not necessarily follow that, because we possess the right, we ought therefore to exercise it. We may possess the right, and it may be inexpedient, unneces-



sary—nay, even unjust—to exercise it. To say the least of it, it is not now necessary or expedient, under existing circumstances, to exercise our constitutional right, and legislate on the subject of slavery in the territory now belonging to this Government. The question is settled in Texas; and should it ever again raise its hydra head within that State, it must be in the adjustment of her boundary lines, which is clearly a matter for judicial investigation and decision. California has framed her Constitution, and excluded slavery; that settles the question there—and that California will ultimately be admitted into this Union is a foregone conclusion. By the local laws of Mexico, the Territory of New Mexico, whatever be her boundaries is free. Slavery must exist by positive law, and therefore cannot exist in New Mexico, until the will of the people abrogates the law as it stood at the time of the cession of the Territory, under the Mexican treaty of peace. The principle is a plain one. If the Canadas were either ceded by treaty or annexed by an act of Congress, they would come into the Union as Free Soil. If, on the other hand, Cuba was either ceded or annexed, she would come in as slave territory. In one case, it would require a positive law by the State itself to create the institution of slavery; in the other, to inhibit or abolish it. But should it ever become necessary to settle this point, the proper tribunal for its adjudication and decision is one to which the whole country would cheerfully appeal—I mean the Supreme Court of the United States.

These, Mr. Chairman, and fellow-representatives, are my views, and, in my humble judgment, the views of the people of Pennsylvania, briefly, and, I trust, clearly, expressed on these grave and momentous questions. With us the preservation of the Union is a paramount consideration. We cling to it as the sheet-anchor of all our hopes. We venerate it as the ark of the covenant of our national existence, and withered be the hand that sacrilegiously touches it. This great confederation of sister States cannot perish; it must not be. Having many members, the Republic has but one body. This nation has but one heart, and every pulsation of that heart beats high and strong for the Union. Sir, cool, cunning, deliberate calculations have been made in this Capitol, as well as elsewhere, of the value of this Union. I will not stop to point out the miserable fallacy of such calculations. My feelings revolt at the mournful task.

Judas Iscariot sold his Lord and Master for thirty pieces of silver. Conscience-stung, he flung back at the feet of those who had bribed him the glittering treasure, and hanged him-

self. His bloated and disembowelled body fell a disgusting spectacle to the earth, and his guilty spirit went hissing to hell. That American citizen who could betray his country and barter away the Union for mere pecuniary considerations deserves no better fate.

But, sir, I say again, this Union is safe. If the President of the United States and Congress assembled cannot preserve it, twenty millions of freemen can and will; and wo be unto him who, either North or South, raises the traitor cry of disunion. An invisible but an electric chain of national sympathy binds the people of this country indissolubly together in one common bond of brotherhood. It is their pride and their glory to be one. What, sir, dissolve this Union!—a Union cemented by the highest and holiest associations of the past, the proud triumphs of the present, and the glorious prospects of the future! Never! Dissolve this Union! God of my country, forbid it!